

# BOOK REVIEW

## A LIGHT IN DARK TIMES: THE NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH AND ITS UNIVERSITY IN EXILE

REVIEWED BY

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Friedlander, Judith (2019). *A Light in Dark Times: The New School for Social Research and Its University in Exile*. New York: Columbia University Press. Pages: 457. Price: 52.02 CDN (hardcover).

In the book *A Light in Dark Times: The New School for Social Research and Its University in Exile* (herein called *A Light in Dark Times*) by Judith Friedlander, the author re-enacts the history of the new school, starting from its first founding moment in 1919 to the process of renewing the new school legacy and rebuilding the graduate faculty in the 1980s. The history told by Friedlander highlights the unending debates over academic freedom and the responsibility of education in Western democracy and liberalism. The author tackles several material realities of the school's ongoing effort to survive.

Judith Friedlander's prologue titled "In the Archives" provides readers a background to the text. It speaks about the founders of the new school and why there was a need for "The New School" – "... they opened the New School as an act of protest against university presidents across the country who had forbidden professors to express themselves freely" (p. ix). It was also stated that the faculty of the new school were set to dismount the autocrats who were impeding the advancement of learning in American institutions. It could be deduced that The New School was established on moral or ethical passion.

*A Light in Dark Times* is divided into 19 chapters which are organized under five parts: (1) A School of Social Research; (2) The Universities in Exile; (3) The Middle Years; (4) "Between Past and Future"; and (5) Renewing the Legacy.

The first part of the book is sub-divided into six chapters. In this section, the author describes the launch of the

new school on February 10, 1919. Friedlander traces the New School's growth, and connects the institutional story of the school with the lives of the dynamic figures – James Harvey Robinson and Charles Bond – who fostered the school's development and were "fiercely committed to academic freedom" (p. 3). Friedlander in this section portrays beautifully the intellectual, scholarly, and political motives of the founders who birthed the New School. A chapter is dedicated to Columbia University; this chapter offers background and surrounding events of the dismissal of two professors who fought against being pressured or forced to take up arms during the Great War. Another chapter reports on Alvin Johnson's regime and restructuring of the New School which, according to the author, was perhaps the most significant moment of the founding years. "Without his vision and entrepreneurial imagination, the New School would have folded in the early 1920s, its impact reduced to a footnote in history" (p. xvii). This is probably why a great deal of the book unfolds through Johnson's lens. From the first part of the book, it is safe to say that what started as a school for social research and a place to promote critical thinking expanded into a haven for scholarship.

The second part of the book is divided into four chapters (chapters 7–10), and offers insights into the school's second founding moments, such as the founding of the German university in exile. This section details how Hitler's regime and dictatorial power negatively affected the German people, especially the academic community. On April 1, 1932, Hitler

placed a ban on Jewish shops and businesses. A week later he introduced the Civil Service Restoration Act ... which called for the immediate dismissal of university professors who failed to meet the new "racial" or political criteria required of those holding positions in state-run institutions. A significant number failed on both counts. (p. 87)

The University in exile opened in 1933 in New York and was Johnson's way of 1) demonstrating his commitment to professors by gathering a full faculty of German social scientists, and 2) preserving an intellectual tradition that might otherwise have gone extinct.

The third part of the book is divided into five chapters (chapters 11–15) and accounts for the "Middle Years" from 1945 to 1964. This part emphasizes the need for timely and proper succession planning in educational organizations, especially for critical positions, such as president, professor, and administrator. The author perceives that some incumbents will "never fit the mold of an administrator" (p. 169) and cause distorted administrative policies in a progressive institution. The section further explains the political, financial, and intellectual challenges administrators underwent under the leadership and or guidance of various educational scholars and other prominent school students, trustees, and academic leaders. However, these challenges were met successfully, by new developments, including a change in the school's name, and an expansion of its program.

The fourth part of the book is divided into two chapters. Chapter 16 is titled "The 'New' New School". This chapter's purpose is an exploration of the paradigm shift of the New School as "taking no chances. It's distinguished that friend and valued trustee would look after long-term planning and development" (p. 255). The New School management hierarchy demonstrates a cooperative and talented team of administrators who welcome ideas from others that cause the institution to flourish. Chapter 17 is titled "Three Doctoral Programs at Risk." The three doctoral programs at risk were Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology. The author cites weaknesses/problems such as "the size of the faculty, the three departments teaching too many students, many of whom did not come close to having the academic preparation they needed to pursue graduate work" (p. 285). Problems also existed with students who dropped out of their MA and PhD programs; those who did complete their graduate studies were rarely offered academic op-

portunities. The "New" New School of the future ushered in a "proposal for reconstitution" in which the graduate faculty was to be rebuilt, reintegrated around a theme, and dedicated "to a system critical of the investigation, meaning, and uses of the social sciences" (p. 296). The proposal welcomed changes suggested by management to include plans to rebuild and expand the board of trustees, endorsed recommendation and appointment of new personnel in strategic positions.

The fifth section of the book, "Renewing the Legacy" has two chapters. Chapter 18, on "Rebuilding the Graduate Faculty," highlights change management carried out by a new president who was visionary and strategic in his approach and vision for the New School. Chapter 19, "Rekindling the Spirit," reveals the need for closer relationships with educational hierarchy as a prerequisite for "some animating ideas and ideals to rekindle the spirit of the University in Exile" (p. 320). Bryan Hovdy and Hans Simons were credited for their collaborative and transformative leadership style of "rescuing twenty-five scholars from behind the Iron Curtain" (p. 320), and for offering scholarships to twenty-five "non-Communist Chinese students stranded in this country" (p. 320). These turnaround strategies called for new management initiatives to enhance "projects to strengthen academic programs at the university," (p. 302) critical to its future.

## Conclusion

Readers will find *A Light in Dark Times* to be educational and informative in underlining the political, financial, and educational challenges that educational leaders faced in their quest to rebuild the New School based on change management and collaboration, while creating visionary relationships with the educational hierarchy. This book provides a useful resource for educational leaders leading through challenging times with a vision to transform educational policies and programs.